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**How schools can become attachment and trauma friendly – a 3 step plan.**

This is why schools should become attachment and trauma friendly.

* The strategies and approaches are based in neuroscience and work!
* They make a difference to children’s lives and life chances.
* They enable children to learn more in school and improve pupil outcomes.

For many adopted parents with adopted children in the education system, schools seem to cause such difficulties for them and their children, with many having to change schools, face regular walks of shame to see the teacher or headteacher or deal with exclusions. Parents seem to have constant battles with their child’s school – be this over behaviour, attendance or the dreaded homework. The recent survey from Adoption UK highlighted this clearly with quite shocking data about the increased likelihood of adopted children being excluded ([Adoption UK – Adopted children 20 times more likely to be excluded – post 11.11.17](https://www.adoptionuk.org/news/adopted-children-20-times-more-likely-be-excluded))

The early years setting is vital in getting the support right for adopted children as many of these early experiences will help develop some of that brain matter and activity that is often missing from early neglect. See the work of the [‘Center on the developing child – Harvard University’](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/)which has some very clear videos and information about brain architecture, toxic stress and executive function and self-regulation skills.

You hear often from parents on forums, groups, friends and via social media that, **“They [school] just don’t get it!”**

Then there is the impact this has on children and parents – the lost sleep, the tears, the worry, the time off work because of exclusion and so on.

Schools have to care for their families as well; without enough gas in the tank it becomes much harder for parents to parent – we must make sure schools are not creating holes and draining the tanks of parents

Schools can drain the tanks through practices such as:

* the ‘walk of shame’ that many parents experience by being called over at the end of the school day
* having a blame culture against the parents (It’s *their* parenting issue)
* not listening to parents who are asking for help
* not listening to professionals who are advising the school
* not having the systems in place to support the child
* having policies and practices that do not adapt to meet the specific needs of pupils

Schools can help top us the tanks through practices such as:

* empathy for the parent
* listening and using the parent as a resource – many of whom have a wealth of knowledge as a result of the adoption journey
* partnership work with the parent and professionals
* meeting the needs of the pupils
* being open and ready to change practices as they learn

**So what can schools do to make school life more successful for adopted children and families?**

There are three broad areas that are required for a school to not only get ‘it’ but live and breathe it. By ‘it’ is meant attachment and trauma- its origins, its implications and the manifestations of how these present in the child. ‘It’ is the Golden Fleece for adopted parents – the trophy we all search for in the education system- it is the royal ‘it’!

The three broad areas which form the bigger picture are made up of 5 Ps:

* **P**rinciples (Knowledge)
* **P**olicies and **P**rocedures
* **P**rovision and **P**ractice

All of this however is extremely reliant on either an informed headteacher or at least an open minded one. Without this, a true shift in paradigm is unlikely to be long lasting or effective or even get off the starting blocks in the first place. The leadership of the school must all get ‘it’ if they are going to lead the change that is required as it is not the easiest of paths to create an attachment and trauma friendly school; it requires determination and confidence to stand up for what is right and good for children against many who may not yet get ‘it’ and fall back on the ‘traditional’ methods of school discipline and policy!

**Knowledge**

This is vital if any change in hearts and minds is going to happen. The amount of knowledge required is actually quite a lot in the context of busy schools and a high demand of the training slots available in the school year. It is something that is likely to need to be built up over many months and even years – but it has to start somewhere. So where?

Firstly let’s look the whole picture of knowledge gaining in terms of meeting the needs of adopted children and their families.

Here is a list of some of the training areas that would be useful to gain a broad understanding of trauma and attachment:

* what generates a healthy attachment?
* what is trauma (acute and complex)?
* adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
* stages of brain development and the impact of trauma on this
* the long term impact of trauma
* understanding zones / windows of tolerance
* fight flight freeze flop responses
* sensory processing and the impact on behaviour
* understand how to engage pupils through PACE
* self -care and blocked care in the classroom
* teachers’ self- regulation

So, as you can see there is quite a lot to get through and unless there is a commitment to understand these things it could take a while to get through this training.

Some overall whole school training is a great place to start and gives an introduction to trauma and attachment. There are lots of great providers out there who can do this for schools and with the increase in pupil premium money for post-lac children there has never been a better time to book some of this training.

Some of the providers for training are:

<http://www.inspiredfoundations.co.uk/>

<https://www.bravehearteducation.co.uk/>

<http://www.jennifernocktrainingandconsultancy.com/>

<http://www.pac-uk.org/training/>

<http://beaconhouse.org.uk/training/>

There are also some amazing resources from these organisations plus [Adoption UK](https://www.adoptionuk.org/)and many more online.

There is increasing use of Twitter to connect with people and organisations. For any adopted parent or educational professional this is an extremely valuable resource. This allows that drip drip mind change into the power of therapeutic approaches in schools and it gives parents and others access to people including medical professionals, clinical and educational psychologists, social workers, trainers, educationalists and one of the most valuable resources – parents of adopted children – who often share their experiences of education. From all of this, schools can gain a wide picture of what the real world looks like for adopted children in our education system and access a range of knowledge and support to help to help them on their journey.

**Policies and Procedures**

Once a setting has the knowledge they can begin to look at making changes to the policies and procedures that are in place that are not attachment and trauma friendly.

There are a number of key policies that are the starting point to review:

**The behaviour policy:**Probably the most important of all the policies – this will set the tone of how the school sees behaviour and how they will respond to incidents. Is there a clear acceptance that behaviour is a communication? Is there a priority given to relationships? Is there a strategy for repair between children and children, and grown-ups and children when things go wrong? Does the policy look at support and not just sanctions?

A good example of how a policy can reflect some of these things can be found in the [behaviour policy](http://www.hazwebs.co.uk/colebourne/?wpdmdl=1864)from [Colebourne Primary School](http://www.colebourne.bham.sch.uk/).

There is a clear ethos across the policy with the following statement written on the very first page:

***“Thinking of a child as behaving badly disposes you to think of punishment. Thinking of a child as struggling to handle something difficult encourages you to help them through their distress.”***

It also has a high priority on the importance of relationship between adults and children:

***“The most important aspect in children feeling valued, safe and secure is the sense of connection with the member of staff. For most children this can be achieved by simple acknowledgement of the child and the child having the knowledge that you have them in your mind, care about them as a person and care about what they are doing.”***

The second key policy, if not contained within the behaviour policy, is that surrounding rewards and sanctions.

The high stakes rewards and sanctions are often damaging to many children and are just not appropriate, e.g, a whole school trip at the end of the year for the ‘good’ kids is just wrong; as is winning a bike or tablet for attending school every day!

**Provision and Practice**

This is where schools can move from understanding trauma and attachment and having policies and procedures in place to directly impacting on children through effective provision and whole school practice and beliefs.

The provision can often deliver the stability the child needs to move from a state where they perceive school to be unsafe to one of safety; only then can the child begin to build the skills to learn more effectively.

The provision that a school can offer is wide ranging – some of if it is expensive and some is about alteration of thinking, people and practice.

The types of provision can be categorised into 3 sections (these follow the Birmingham Local Authority ‘Right Help Right Time’ model):

* **Universal**: the standard level of provision and support for all children
* **Universal plus**: is when a child and their family have needs that require support and interventions above and beyond normal universal services. These would usually be provided by
* **Additional**: these require more specialist or intensive support and are often more expensive, but are vital for those with more complex needs.

So, what sort of provision fits these areas?

**Universal**:

Here are a few examples of universal provision that can be implemented…

* staff listen to children, are curious and empathetic and have a desire to do what they can to help a child having a tough time
* application of the attachment friendly policies
* no shouting from adults
* effective tracking of behaviour to help identify patterns and changes in order for support to be given
* structure, routines and boundaries for all pupils and adaptations to these to meet the individual needs
* predictability of people and situations
* planned support for transitions and changes
* the use of PACE when dealing with children (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy)
* seeing the child and not the behaviour
* being reflective of situations and looking at what the adult and system could have done differently and then make the changes

In order for a school to become attachment and trauma friendly, every member of staff needs to know what they can do on a day to day basis from smiling and saying hello to children to recognising when a child is having a tough time. A quote from <https://georgecouros.ca/blog/archives/tag/urie-bronfenbrenner>is:***“It takes a school not a teacher to raise a child.”*** This is very true – everyone needs to get ‘it’ and work together to help regulate the child throughout the day. The more we can help lower the stress and anxiety the less chance of a stress fuelled fight, flight, freeze reaction either at school or when the child gets home (or even before they have left the playground at the end of the day!)

A lesson was observed where the class were actively working on a joint writing task across the floor and two children were sitting on a table just watching the other children going about their task. They explained that they had been poorly and were still feeling a bit under the weather so were watching what the others were doing. The teacher was relaxed about this as this is what they needed at that point in time – no drama – no fuss – just adapting to the situation.

This idea of the universal offer is summed up by a prospective parent who visited school this week and afterwards tweeted: ***“Never been to a school where everyone seems so genuinely happy and relaxed – pupils, teachers and other school staff. Just shows what you can do when you are truly child and attachment-focussed. Amazing.”***

It is useful to get an outside perspective from time to time!

**Universal Plus:**

This is where schools need to start using funds to provide some of the support – the earlier schools can put the right support in place the better chance there is of improved outcomes.

Here are just some examples of the additional provision that a school could consider:

* leaning mentors
* family support / workers
* pastoral or nurture rooms and sessions
* social and emotional groups
* learning intervention groups
* tuition
* forest school / outdoor leaning sessions
* sensory equipment and tools

**Additional:**

The final group of provision examples are of those children with more complex and significant needs. Provision could include:

* 1 to 1 workers
* external specialists (for example psychologists, occupational therapists, music/drama/art therapists)
* safe spaces such as nurture rooms that are available at any time should the child need them
* higher levels of containment and/or structure for difficult times such as transitions
* key adults to meet and greet
* adults to support at tricky times
* provide learning breaks
* alternative lessons and support when they are needed
* forest school sessions

The biggest thing a school can do is to see the child not just the behaviour; to move to a mind-set of:

* ‘What does this child need?’
* ‘What is this behaviour telling us?’
* ‘What can we put in place to help?’

On the whole, be flexible, be creative and just provide whatever it is the child needs to the best of your ability. Schools can and do change lives!

**Making ‘it’ happen**

To ensure these things happen it is important to have a plan to implement the three stages of Principles, Policies and Procedures, and finally Provision and Practice. A starting point could be:

* Add “becoming attachment friendly” to the school improvement plan;
* Review your vision and values so they are aligned with being attachment and trauma friendly;
* Develop champions – this means teachers who are naturally nurturing or really good with structure and who build good relationships – these will be the easiest to bring on board and quickest to get ‘it’;
* Engage with parents, especially those of the most vulnerable children and those with needs, and listen, listen, listen – don’t judge, don’t become defensive – just listen. They will give you honest opinions that will help you see the impact the existing approaches are having, both positive and negative;
* Remain open minded!

This is not always the smoothest of journeys but you will end up with a happier set of children, parents and staff.

When this is introduced, schools usually see overall behaviour improve, less use of exclusions and higher achievement and attendance, with happy children

With thanks to Stuart Guest